

# First record of American Wigeon *Mareca americana* in The Gambia, and associated records from Kartong Bird Observatory

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**Première mention du Canard à front blanc *Mareca americana* pour la Gambie et autres observations de l'Observatoire d'oiseaux de Kartong.** Le 12–22 décembre 2015, une femelle du Canard à front blanc *Mareca americana* a été observée et photographiée à l'Observatoire d'oiseaux de Kartong (13°05'46.8"N 16°45'53.2"W), sur la côte de la Gambie. Il s'agit de la première mention documentée pour le pays. Une Sarcelle d'hiver *Anas crecca*, femelle, la première pour l'Observatoire, était présente pendant la même période.

On 12 December 2015, CJC observed a female duck on wetlands near Kartong Bird Observatory (13°05'46.8"N 16°45'53.2"W), on the Atlantic coast in south-west Gambia. Further observations and photographs made at the same site on 14 December revealed that it was an American Wigeon *Mareca americana*, a species previously unrecorded in the country (Barlow *et al.* 1997, Borrow & Demey 2011). The bird was last seen on 22 December at the same wetland (Fig. 1). The weather at this time was typical for mid December being dry with clear skies and temperatures reaching 32°C during the day. The Kartong wetlands form part of the Kartong to Allahein coast Important Bird Area (Robinson 2001), an area of contrasting habitats including open water, *Typha*-dominated reedbeds, cultivated rice fields and vegetable gardens, *Acacia* scrub and vegetated sand dunes.

The wigeon was first observed in an area of ephemeral pools and flooded wader scrapes that lie in a shallow depression between the sand dunes and gardens. It was feeding in the same shallow pools as several Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus*, a Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*, Common Greenshanks *Tringa nebularia*, Wood Sandpipers *Tringa glareola*, Common Sandpipers *Actitis hypoleucos* and a Black-headed Heron *Ardea melanocephala*. Also notable was the presence of a female Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca* observed in the same area on 12 December 2015. Although irregularly encountered at freshwater wetlands in Senegambia, this is the first record of Eurasian Teal in the Kartong Bird Observatory recording area. When flushed, the wigeon and the teal flew

off together before returning to the same wetland (Fig. 2).

Separation of juveniles or females of *M. americana* from those of Eurasian Wigeon *M. penelope* can be difficult. Compared to the normally grey-headed appearance of *americana*, the individual at Kartong was quite brown and, therefore, similar to juvenile / female-type *penelope*, although the obvious speckling on the head is not typical of *penelope* (Fig. 1). Confirmation as *americana* came when the bird was seen in flight, where the pure white axillaries and central underwing bar were particularly obvious (Fig.



**Figure 1.** Female American Wigeon *Mareca americana*, Kartong Bird Observatory, The Gambia, 22 December 2015 (Colin J. Cross)

Canard à front blanc *Mareca americana*, femelle, Observatoire d'oiseaux de Kartong, Gambie, 22 décembre 2015 (Colin J. Cross)



**Figure 2.** Female American Wigeon *Mareca americana* (top) and female Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*, Kartong Bird Observatory, The Gambia, 12 December 2015; the former has clean white axillaries and central underwing (Colin J. Cross)

Canard à front blanc *Mareca americana*, femelle (en haut) et Sarcelle d'hiver *Anas crecca*, femelle, Observatoire d'oiseaux de Kartong, Gambie, 12 décembre 2015 ; noter les axillaires et couvertures sous-alaires moyennes blanches du premier (Colin J. Cross)

**Figure 3.** Female American Wigeon *Mareca americana* (left) and female Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*, Kartong Bird Observatory, The Gambia, 17 December 2015 (Colin J. Cross)

Canard à front blanc *Mareca americana*, femelle (à gauche) et Sarcelle d'hiver *Anas crecca*, femelle, Observatoire d'oiseaux de Kartong, Gambie, 17 décembre 2015 (Colin J. Cross)

**Figure 4.** Female American Wigeon *Mareca americana* with Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* and Spur-winged Lapwing *Vanellus spinosus*, Kartong Bird Observatory, The Gambia, 17 December 2015 (Colin J. Cross)

Canard à front blanc *Mareca americana*, femelle, avec Échasse blanche *Himantopus himantopus* et Vanneau éperonné *Vanellus spinosus*, Observatoire d'oiseaux de Kartong, Gambie, 17 décembre 2015 (Colin J. Cross)

2) and strikingly different to the often dusky underwing of *penelope*. Further support for identification as *americana* came from the long-tailed appearance, with the wingtip only just reaching the tip of the longest uppertail-covert,

the grey-tinged outer web of the outermost tertial (white or pale in *penelope*) and the straight edge to the feathering from the gape at the base of the bill; this feathering curves along the bill base in *penelope*. The lack of a distinct white wingbar

on the upperwing (formed by black-tipped white greater coverts), the short and narrow tertials, dark forehead and crown, and plain scapulars and upperwing-coverts all point to this being a first-year bird.

The wigeon was observed again on 14 December at the same ephemeral wetland. Similarly, on 17 December both the American Wigeon and Eurasian Teal were photographed at the same site. It was noticeable that the two migrant ducks associated closely, with the teal often following the wigeon (Fig. 3). Following a prolonged rainy season in 2015, the main Kartong wetlands were full of deeper water, whereas these rapidly drying, ephemeral wetlands provided ideal alternative foraging habitat for migrant and resident waders, and other wetland-dependent species (Fig. 4). Both the American Wigeon and Eurasian Teal were last seen on 22 December, initially at the same shallow wetland and then in flight with White-faced Whistling Ducks *Dendrocygna viduata*. Despite careful searches of the whole wetland complex neither bird was relocated again. The observations of American Wigeon and Eurasian Teal followed soon after the presence, on 5–11 December, of the second Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* for Kartong, the first being a Spanish-ringed bird, seen in October 2010.

Palaearctic ducks are fairly uncommon within the Kartong Bird Observatory recording area as the wetlands are small and seasonal. The commonest migrants encountered are Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* and Garganey *Spatula querquedula*, which are recorded in small groups between early September and October but rarely stay long. With two or three records each winter Northern Shoveler *Spatula clypeata* is even rarer and there has been just one record of Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* since 2010.

American Wigeon breeds across most of north-western North America and winters in lowland marshes south to Panama and northern Colombia (Madge & Burn 1988). Vagrants are regular in Western Europe, mainly along the Atlantic seaboard from Iceland to Morocco. There are three previous records of vagrancy in West Africa (Borrow & Demey 2014) and more numerous records from the Azores and Canaries (Clarke 2006). The first record for West Africa was a male at Djoudj National Park, Senegal, in February 1975 (Morel & Morel 1990) and the second a pair

on Maio, Cape Verde Islands, between December 2004 and January 2005 (Hazevoet 2010). Most recently, a male was at Djoudj National Park between 20 December 2005 and at least mid-March 2006 (A. Flitti *in Bull. ABC* 13: 96 & 106; A. Flitti & P. Triplet *in Bull. ABC* 13: 228) where it was joined by another male on 19–20 January 2006 (N. Borrow *in Bull. ABC* 13: 228). The observations documented here represent the first published sighting for The Gambia.

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